

The Briefing

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Children's ministry: Plan for disciples

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The third principle of children's ministry is to reach the family and friends of the children we are ministering to with the message of the gospel.

To bring new readers up to speed, I, together with my wife and three young daughters, have been following Bruce Linton with a notebook and camera for a good number of the 20-odd years that he has been working in children's ministry. The summary so far: every single church member who loves Jesus is a partner in the work of helping parents help their children to know the Lord Jesus, who loved us and gave his life for our redemption.

To that end, we are always keen to persuade readers that children are not a separate species, but a sub-category of what we term 'human beings'. It's easy, in practice, to fall into the trap of viewing them in the same way that we view an appendix or a spleen: a part of who we are, but once they begin to cause us pain we call in the specialist (in this case, a children's worker) and have them quietly removed.

Our response: No! At the risk of crossing into another discussion, children are human from the moment of conception, and our attitude to them is the same as the Bible's—they are sinners, in need of grace.

Now in this third principle, our attention turns to those who surround our children—other children, and of course their families.

The focus of children's ministry—children—can be clearly and easily established, but the grace of the God who desires to bless can't be so easily limited. Children have parents; they have brothers, they have sisters, they have friends, they have enemies. Like a hospital that is easier to administer if there are no inconvenient patients, it would make our lives considerably simpler to forget those other people. But the gospel itself pushes us to see that the people surrounding these children also need to be forgiven for their rebellion against Jesus.

So how can we reach along these relationships to proclaim God's glory to the whole world?

For practical purposes, let's consider such a question by structuring our thinking in terms of a school year. Home schoolers, empty nesters and single people won't need to structure their thinking in the same way, but such knowledge will be indispensable if you want to serve others (and even if not—it will give you a good sense of when cheap off-season holiday packages will become available!). Every family facing a school year has a daily routine, a weekly routine, a start-of-year routine, and logistical challenges represented by the approach of holidays, the end of the year, and the madness of Christmas.

Daily routines

Grace in families will be expressed daily in reading the Bible, prayer, and—as far as grace specific to children is concerned—keeping up with food and medical needs. In most families sleep can be treated as somewhat optional for about 10-15 years, depending on the number of children, but some things must be constantly noticed. What is not optional is this: thinking prayerfully and practically about how we can use our families, both natural and church, to reach the children of others and their families as well.

This begins with a daily routine of teaching our children, in whatever way we can, to read the Bible and pray for themselves. Christian parents will want to do this for their own children first, but not to the exclusion of others. Those without children in the home will want to work out ways to encourage this for other children. Do you have nephews? Do you have nieces? Do you have godchildren or grandchildren, or others that you are praying for? The process begins with regular daily prayer that God's Holy Spirit would give these children new birth, followed by daily attention to God's word and the other aspects of love for our offspring.

Eating together around the dinner table, followed by Bible reading and prayer, is one classic picture of what this might look like—this daily Lord's Supper can be extended to include honorary aunts and uncles and just about anyone, really, as time and opportunity allow. Admittedly, in the Cheng household this routine is sometimes disrupted by our need to gather not around the Bible and a dinner table but around an episode of *Masterchef* ("Come on kids, you could cook like that if you tried"). But the principle of daily meeting together to meet with God is the very foundation for outreach to other families and friends.

Weekly routines

Weekly, this daily round compounds, expands and complexifies to include many others, including those people who are part of our children's lives. The involvement of the wider church family becomes both more obvious and more important.

At a bare minimum it means that those who see ministry as essential (not only to children, but to everyone) will want to turn up to church ready for action [Hebrews 10:25. \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2010.25\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2010.25) -style—not neglectfully, but encouragingly. Those who have children will want to bring their own children to church, and that will mean establishing from about age four onwards that Friday night sport (when youth group or kids' club is on) or Sunday morning basketball or music is less likely to happen in your household than the freezing over of hell. Don't neglect church, children's clubs or camps for the sake of a football game, or more likely (given the way these things are structured) 15 football games over 15 weekends.

Meeting with God's family comes first. That is true not only in children's ministry but in all ministry. The application of this principle doesn't just apply to sport and music. Don't bother buying a holiday home. You won't be using it on Sundays, because you will be at church meeting with God's people. If you're one of the fortunate many who have managed to save a great deal of money, time and energy by not buying a holiday house, then use them in a better way. As I've said before, eschew your mid-life-crisis convertible and buy a people mover—even if you only have two children. They will want to invite their friends along to kids' club or youth group. If their friends' parents are not Christian, then the transport of those friends falls to you—hence, the people mover.

Plan early for the future

For ministers and children's ministry leaders: don't keep your plans for the year a secret—the church family should be talking amongst themselves about how the work you're doing with children can be used to reach the community.

For example, if you're thinking of starting the year with a bang, coinciding with children going back to school, it means that a few months earlier you will have already gone around to a few key individuals and persuaded them not to allow the senior youth group and the Bible study co-ordinator to gobble up all the best volunteers for their programs. Yes, I'm repeating myself. Yes, there will be back-room arm wrestles and possibly blood on the carpet by the time this negotiation is done. But you will have leaders for the children's program and that is what you need.

Make sure these leaders have had their working with children training and checks, and whatever else is necessary for safe and legal children's ministry. Then get your parents and leaders together before things get underway for the year, and explain and pray together about what your plans are and what you are asking them to do.

If you're *not* the minister or the children's ministry leader, still get involved in whatever way you can, especially that hard, sweaty work of prayer. Offer to design the programs for the term and special events. Do nerdy things to the church website to make it shiny, happy and, above all, up-to-date, so that when registrations start to roll in for the children's camp, it can all be done online without fuss. Why not upgrade your driver's licence so that you can drive a large van or a bus? Then when your church's children's ministry has a trip to the beach or to a camp, there you will be too, offering to drive the church van or the local community bus so that more children can come along.

Administrators, paid or otherwise, help your children's ministry leaders by continually harassing them without mercy for a detailed program of the year's activities, especially for term 1 and the following holiday period.

If you are thinking there will be a mid-year holiday club, or a camp later in the year, get it into the church program before the year starts, and then go to every single parent and personally show them how to use their calendars or electronic diaries or mobile phones to enter in the dates they need to keep free so that their children can go on these camps. Take their deposits. Offer them early-bird rates. In short, do every single legal thing you can to make sure that their children are yours for certain specified periods of the year. The Bible urges us to pray constantly; Bruce Linton and any children's worker worth their salt will simply add 'plan constantly'. You do this so that you can have at least a sketch of a long-term vision of gospel ministry that extends from this week, on to this term, this year, and to the whole of the three to five years that you will have a group of children as part of the pre-school to infants ministry; followed then by a three-year plan for the primary school ministry, which leads in to the high school ministry. The latter is someone else's problem (unless you're a parent, then it's yours too) but these plans are also your joy, for God's word will do its work and will not return to him void.

By the way, if you are part of a small church where the youth work consists of the three minister's kids and two of their friends, and this counsel begins to fill you with despair, then in the words of one famous hitchhiker's guide, *Don't Panic*. Every single one of these suggestions begins not with the assumption of massive resources, but with the prayerful desire to see people brought under the sound of the gospel. Start small, do what you can, and start a wish list of things that you might do when the word of God starts to bear fruit in children's lives. The best and most effective evangelism, in our experience, will not generally happen through special events. It will happen through the daily and weekly flow of relationships, as children hear the word of God from those around them and from the church family over a period of months, even years.

The gospel and fun

What role do the children themselves play? It may be that many seven-year-olds will not read this article. But for their parents and leaders, the point is that they too are disciples of Christ who have been charged with the responsibility of making disciples, baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How will this happen?

Apart from their own prayers and sharing (and we mustn't underestimate their capacity for understanding and telling the gospel), they are the ones who will invite their friends. They need to trust the leader who says "If you come to this children's program, you will hear about Jesus and you will have fun—especially the first, but always the second, and we won't force you to choose one over the other". In fact, even the most fun bits will have a reason. Whether it's a game with lots of running with an egg and spoon that illustrates a passage about running the race carefully rather than in quick fits and starts, or a puppet show where the puppet realizes that their bad school results or over-consumption of chocolate won't stop them being God's friend—it doesn't matter. Careful and prayerful planning means that every single thing you do in your children's program, from the welcome you give to the game you play to the talk you delegate, advances the gospel generally and the main idea you are promoting that day (more on this important 'everything has a reason' concept in articles to come).

If, like Bruce Linton, you have access to an old house that is now being used for meeting rooms, you could (for example) run an evening called 'In the Dark' where leaders positioned strategically in a darkened house (for safety as well as to teach the Bible!) assist children in some biblically-themed quest that requires dark clothes, hiding and seeking, and collecting information. You then finish with a well-lit talk that explains (for example) how the darkness plague in Egypt was awful but, along with the other plagues that they learnt about on their way through the house, points to the wonderful rescue of God. The winning team is the team that has collected the most plagues, together with information gleaned from the leaders, in the time allocated for this spooky game.

If that seems a little sketchy, here's Bruce's take on the development of this most excellent evening of fun and gospel:

When we asked children for their input on what events they would most like, inevitably their first choice involved the lights out. "Murder in the dark!" they would cry. "How do you play?" we would ask. The answer came back: "Who knows, but you just turn the lights out and make heaps of noise!"

The enthusiasm was there but so also the recipe for a disaster. Was there any way we could combine their enthusiasm with a game that had some structure, and could be both safe and satisfying? Our answer came: 'In the Dark' (cue spooky noises). It started out as a simple game... and developed from there. In the end we built mazes (out of plastic sheeting; no hard surfaces) in our church hall and then wrote a story line that involved them making their way repeatedly through our maze and gaining information to solve the puzzle we had set up. The advantages of this were many. It satisfied the desire to play in the dark. It was safe. It was a game that (in its final form) was unique to us. It lasted longer than most games. It was cheap. For all these reasons and more, it quickly gained a reputation as *the* local kids event to be involved in when it happened. It didn't hurt that tradesmen in the congregation could help build the maze, and so make it all happen.

So, using nothing more than the regular fun program, you will be evangelizing children, and helping them to evangelize their friends.

Every event that you put on yields similar possibilities for extending relationships to and beyond the regular church children out to their friends and families. Want to meet the parents of the children? Then organize the leaders of the children's small groups, with suitable but also suitably vague warning, to drop in one evening to the homes of their group members. The children and the parents need to know that it is going to happen at some time, but not the exact moment. The fun bit comes in that the children have to come to the group on Friday night wearing what they were in when the leaders visited—if pyjamas, then pyjamas; if a towel around the head after a shower, then a towel around the head. The functional bit of this exercise is that the leaders get to meet the parents of children in their group personally and in their home—an ideal, brief, friendly, non-threatening activity good for the first term.

Whatever the activity, these broad principles and methods apply to each and every special event that might be associated with the children's ministry: special pre-school services, Christmas or Easter events, parent evenings for the children's club.

The main focus of the children's ministry will always be the children. But the wise church leader or member will have a constant eye out for how these events can be leveraged to reach more and more people with the good news that we can be forgiven for our sins. The conviction that this news is true is worth more than anything a special or regular event can deliver; but once convinced, we will be using all our activities to promote that message as effectively as we can. Bruce and I are busting with similar ideas from the collection, but they will have to wait for future articles.